

Identity and Ideology

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Is national identity a contested concept in Asia? How plastic are these identities once established; how permeable are they to what has been termed “global mass culture”?¹

Asia is a vast and extremely diverse region that defies simplistic generalisations. While a number of countries have fairly homogeneous populations, such as Japan and Korea, the population of a great number of countries in the region are multi-racial and multi-ethnics. For instance, Indonesia has over 700 ethnic groups with distinct languages (not dialects) and traditions, while Malaysia is primarily composed of indigenous Malays and two other racial groups, Chinese and Indians. At the same time, almost all of the world’s great religions and civilisations have left their imprints in Asia. South East Asia in particular has for centuries been at the cross roads of civilisations, adopting and adapting Hinduism, Buddhism, Confucianism, Islam, as well as different variants of Christianity and western cultures. The historical experience of one Asian country to another has also been different. While a few countries escaped direct foreign colonialism, several Asian countries experienced colonisations by different western colonial powers for long periods of time. Modern ideological conflicts have also touched different parts of Asia, sometimes violently, leaving their indelible marks in the region.

Given all of these varieties and differences in historical experience, it is to be expected that the formation of national identity and how it evolves over time would not be uniform throughout Asia. Nevertheless, despite the great regional diversity there are a number of common themes that can be found. This brief paper will only look at the experience of a few countries in Asia by trying to answer three major questions: Is

¹ Presented at the Asia Society-The National Intelligence Council 2020 Project. 5-7 May, 2004.

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national identity a contested concept? How plastic are these identities once established; how permeable are they to what has been termed “global mass culture”?

Is national identity a contested concept in Asia?

With the possible exceptions of Japan and Thailand, which escaped long periods of direct foreign colonialism, and therefore have enjoyed relative political continuity as nation-states with well defined national boundaries and identities, the construction of national identities in most Asian countries was a Twentieth Century phenomenon. The nationalist movements that began to emerge in the early Twentieth Century began to gather momentum in the post World War II period, which saw the end of western colonialism and the birth of several new nation-states. On the whole it can be argued that in Asia the development of national identities, which are closely linked to the political formation of modern nation-states, has mostly been formed as a reaction to, or a by product of, foreign occupations and interventions.

In a number of cases there have been disagreements from the very beginning about the nature of the polities to be established, while in others the departure of the common enemies soon revealed fundamental differences in societies. In other words, national identity is indeed often a contested concept, so that nation building and state building have remained the central preoccupations of the developing countries in Asia to the present day. The failures to develop inclusive national identities in multicultural societies have at times led to secessionist movements, communal conflicts and racial riots. To illustrate these points we only need to look at the experiences of Indonesia, Malaysia and the Philippines.

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Despite its tremendous diversity Indonesia has been characterised by its strong sense of nationalism and national identity. The shared historical experience of being under brutal Dutch rule had been the most important ingredient in uniting the heterogeneous people of the Indonesian Archipelago, who for the first time in history had been brought together under a single political unit by the Netherlands East Indies colonial administration. The nationalist movements succeeded in developing a new Indonesian national identity that transcended ethnic, racial and religious differences, uniting the peoples from different racial, ethnic and religious backgrounds in a common struggle for independence and the creation of a new Indonesian nation state. One of the most prominent founding fathers of modern Indonesia, Sukarno, engaged in myth making to create a new Indonesian national identity in the years before independence by glorifying the common past, castigating the dark colonial present and promising a bright future for the united and independent country.

Yet no sooner was independence achieved, Indonesia was wracked by over two decades of violent conflicts, including a civil war. A fundamental difference over ideologies, about whether Indonesia would become a pluralist secular state, an Islamic state or a communist state led to insurgencies, counterinsurgencies, massacres and political purges. The issue of ideology was only finally resolved in the mid 1980s when *Pancasila*² was accepted as the sole foundation of the state. Despite the existence of a radical minority that continues to struggle for the creation of an Islamic state or the imposition of the *sharia* on Muslims, in general one can say that today ideology is no

² Pancasila or 5 Principles was adopted as the Indonesian national ideology soon after the proclamation of independence in 1945. It is a compromise between those who wish to establish an Islamic state and those who want a secular state. The 5 Principles are: Belief in One God; Humanity; National Unity, Democracy and Social Justice.

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longer a contested issue in Indonesia. Nevertheless, Indonesia continues to face secessionist movements in its most outlying provinces, in Aceh and West Papua, driven by the latter's grievances against what they see as the central government's economic exploitation and socio-political marginalisation of their areas. The Free Aceh Movement (GAM) and the Organisation of Papuan Independence (OPM) have long struggled to establish separate states in Aceh and West Papua respectively.

In the Philippines, the formation of a national identity has closely been linked to the long period of Spanish colonisation and the Filipino's revolutionary struggle for independence in the late Nineteenth century. Interestingly, the Philippines's relations with the United States, which took over from Spain as the new colonial power, have generally been seen in positive light, making the Philippines-US special relations an important part of the current Filipino national identity. This was despite the fact that after helping the Filipinos drive out the Spaniards, the Americans brutally crushed local resistance to subsequent American rule.

Although the Philippines' fought for independence against Spain its national identity has in fact been closely identified with Roman Catholicism, since the Spanish rulers succeeded in converting most of their subject people to Catholicism. This is in marked contrast to the rest of South East Asia, where conversion to Christianity had been much more limited as most of the peoples were already Muslims, Buddhists or Hindus. The strong identification of the Philippines' national identity with Catholicism, however, has alienated the Muslim minorities living in the southern part of the country. Some of these Muslim subjects do not regard the Philippines' polity as being sufficiently inclusive, for Muslim minorities are being relegated to a secondary position, so that they

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want to establish a separate Muslim state. For many years the island of Mindanao has been a scene of periodic conflicts between various rebel groups and government troops.

At the same time, the special Filipino-American relations have also been contested by nationalist groups. The most violent opposition came from the communists, who for many years launched a guerrilla war against the government. Although without violence, there have also emerged strong nationalist oppositions to the continuing special military relations between the Philippines and the United States. These can be seen from the opposition to the renewal of agreement on military bases, leading to the closure of US military bases in the Philippines and from the strong public criticisms against the direct involvement of American soldiers in the Philippines' government fight against the Abu Sayaf rebels in Mindanao. . Nationalist historians have also tried to highlight the war between the Filipino nationalists and the Americans in 1899, causing the deaths of between 250,000 to 600,000 Filipinos, thus challenging the conventional Philippines-U.S. historiography that paints the U.S. as the liberators of the Philippines.

In Malaysia the development of a single transcending national identity has been even more problematic. Unlike in Indonesia where a new national identity was forged initially as a means to obtain independence from colonial rule, in Malaya no such nationalism emerged. The indigenous Malay rulers seemed to be quite happy under British rule as long as the Malays continued to enjoy special privileges. The problem was that the British had brought in large numbers of Chinese and Indian migrants to work in the tin mines and rubber plantations. These migrant communities came to be predominant in the economic field, though the British protected the social and political privileges of the Malays.

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An attempt made by the British in the late 1945, to grant the migrant population liberal citizenship rights and to create a new and equal Malayan identity for every citizen, in preparation for eventual self-rule were strongly resisted by the Malays. The indigenous Malays feared that they would lose their special privileges and might in fact become marginalized in their own land by the more aggressive new comers. As a result after the granting of independence in 1957 Malaya, later called Malaysia after the incorporation of Sabah and Sarawak, was established as a state based on communal lines. The terms of independence were that the migrant communities would be granted citizenship with certain restrictions, while the Malays would retain their special political status. The official religion of Malaya/Malaysia is Islam, and to be Malays means to be Muslims as well. Although after its rapid economic development and modernisation the Malaysian identity seems to have become much more pronounced, communal divisions have continued to define Malaysian politics, which at times have led to racial tensions and even violence. It remains to be seen whether at some future date a new Malaysian identity transcending the current communal differentiations would eventually emerge.

Nowhere, however, is the concept of national identity so bitterly contested as in Taiwan. While the struggles to formulate and sustain a common national identity in other countries are primarily regarded as domestic affairs, the creation of a Taiwanese national identity has led to both international tensions and domestic controversies. It all started with the civil war over ideologies in China, pitting the nationalist against the communist forces, which ended with the defeat of the nationalist government of the Kuo Min Tang (KMT) and the transformation of mainland China into a communist state and society. The People's Republic of China views Taiwan as a renegade province after the defeated

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nationalists escaped to the island. At the same time the KMT government in Taipei, which continued to lay claim to the whole of China, also regarded the people living in Taiwan as Chinese belonging to the larger China.

In the past decade, however, a new Taiwanese nationalist movement has developed and gathered momentum, demanding a separate *de facto* and *de jure* Taiwanese national identity and a separate independent state. The Democratic People's Party, that has Taiwanese independence as its political platform, won the presidential election in 2000 and has attracted more supporters over the years. This phenomenon has naturally alarmed China, which has threatened to launch a military attack against Taiwan if it were to declare independence, and has divided the Taiwanese people between the pro-independence and pro-status quo groups, as can be seen from the recent presidential election. Unless there are fundamental changes in Beijing's attitude towards Taiwan, which at the moment seem unlikely, the issue of Taiwan's national identity will remain a contested issue, particularly as the development of a separate Taiwanese identity will only become stronger over time.

How plastic are these identities once established; how permeable are they to global mass culture?

In Asia the construction of national identities has often been an arduous and painful process, often involving bloody conflicts. Not surprisingly most Asian countries, particularly those that have achieved independence from colonial rule or imperial subjection, have attached great value to their respective national identities. While in Europe nationalism has come to be regarded as a dangerous sentiment, as national chauvinism had led to two world wars, in Asia nationalism is equated with patriotism and is considered to be a high virtue. Only through the development of a common national

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identity and nationalism could the disparate people of the Indonesian archipelago unite to overthrow colonial oppression and establish their own independent state. Since many countries in the region are still in the process of nation and state building, and few can take their national unity or even survival for granted, national identities tend to be guarded jealously.

The experience of a number of Asian countries, however, revealed that the nature of the regimes in power determine how national identities are treated, whether they are seen as dynamic and open so that identities can be plural and evolve over time, or whether they are regarded as closed and utterly unique, thus allowing no more room for changes or for competitive identities to emerge. In fact, a number of authoritarian regimes in the region created or manipulated national identities, endowing them with certain rigid characteristics as a means of political control. The Indonesian experience under 32 years of Suharto's New Order authoritarian rule can help to illustrate this point.

Just as Indonesia's founding fathers had engaged in myth making to foster a common national identity that transcends racial, ethnic and religious differences, the Suharto regime also engaged in myth making by imbuing the Indonesian national identity with certain unchanging characteristics. Although the development of the nationalist movement and the birth of the modern nation states in Asia cannot be separated from western history and influences, particularly western education and the influence of the French and the American revolutions, the New Order government argued that Indonesian national values wholly originated from within. The regime then proceeded to define what the Indonesian national identity was as well as the correct, and therefore politically acceptable, values associated with that identity. Such values included a strong sense of

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nationalism, an emphasis on consensus, respect for authority, the rejection of communism, Islamism or western liberalism, as well as the deification of the national ideology and the 1945 Constitution so that the constitution could never be amended. By monopolising the definition of the national identity the New Order government was able to impose strict social and political control, accusing those with different ideas as subversives and enemies of the state. Ideas such as democracy and respect for human rights were considered foreign ideas, and therefore should be rejected. Continuing attachments to local or primordial identities or attraction to a supra-national regional or global identity were regarded as dangerous since these could undermine the national identity.

The experience of Indonesia was not unique. Just as national identities in Asia had in many cases been artificially constructed for political ends, such as national independence and the formation of modern nation states, politics had also played a dominant role in the articulation of national identities in the subsequent years. Before the Asian financial crisis many leaders in the region extolled the virtue of the “Asian Values”, usually signifying that the people must be discipline, work hard, save their earnings and show unquestioning loyalty to their governments. The national identities that had been established in the respective countries were idealised, protected from challenges coming from within or outside the countries. As the protectors of the “true” national identities the regimes in power can then legitimately prosecute all of those who contest them, particularly those trying to offer alternative forms of identities. The “Asian Values” argument emerged as a reaction by certain Asian leaders, in particular Lee Kuan

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Yew of Singapore and Mahathir Mohammad of Malaysia, to western criticisms regarding the lack of democracy and respect for human rights in a number of Asian countries.

Despite the sometime crude and heavy-handed attempts by some governments to “protect” their national identities and cultures from insidious foreign influences, very few have in fact succeeded in insulating their countries from the forces of globalisation. With the exception of North Korea and till recently Myanmar, most countries in East Asia have been enthusiastic proponents of economic development and international trade, and history has shown that trade links with peoples from different cultures had also led to exchanges of ideas and values. In modern time, economic development, with education as its corollary, has been the single most important agent of social transformation,

As has been mentioned earlier, South East Asia has always been at the crossroads of civilisations. This is quite different from North East Asia where China and Japan had for long periods of time sealed themselves from the outside world. Before the arrival of the western colonial powers, which transformed local societies by military and political force, South East Asian countries had been converted to Hinduism, Buddhism and Islam through peaceful means, often by means of trade over a long period of time. The cultures and traditions of South East Asia have mostly been the products of adoptions and adaptations of the great world religions and civilisations coming from outside the region. The introduction of western education in the early twentieth century, introducing such new ideas as nation states, sovereignty, freedom, democracy and political parties that had never existed before, transformed the Asian political landscape. Nevertheless, despite these acculturation and similarities across regions, each Asian country has been able to form a distinct and unique identity of its own.

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Given the basic permeability and adaptability of some of the cultures in the region it is only to be expected that the onslaughts of the forces of globalisation, which among others have led to the creation of global mass culture, have also left their imprints in Asia. North East Asia is no exception. Since being forcefully opened to the outside world Japan has embraced modernisation with great determination, adopting and adapting western ideas, customs and technologies without losing its Japanese identity, which seems to be both changing rapidly while at the same time remaining essentially Japanese.

In a number of South East Asian countries globalisation has been both feared as threats to traditional values and hailed as liberators from the forces of feudalism and repression, depending on the viewers' perspectives. There is little doubt that the democratic waves that toppled authoritarian regimes in many countries, including in North and South East Asia can largely be attributed to the forces of globalisation. The success of the "people power" movements against authoritarian regimes in certain countries could be seen and give inspirations to similar movements elsewhere. The imposition of "universal values" is becoming harder to resist, thus putting those governments who continue to talk about particularistic values on the defensive. In the social arena, the emergence of a metropolitan super culture manufactured in Hollywood, marked among others by consumerism, has also swept Asian cities, making one city very much like another.

Despite the difficulties encountered by many Asian countries, it can generally be argued that with the exception of Taiwan the nation states that now exist in the region are fairly well established, with clearly drawn boundaries and distinctive national identities. It can also be noted that with increasing self confidence the countries in the region have

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also become much more open, both to aspirations from below and the forces of changes from the wider global community. Experiences of periodic conflicts over ideologies and identities, which in the past had led to the imposition of authoritarian regimes, in a growing number of countries have led to a greater political openness and willingness to accept plurality. At the same time, the desire to compete and be accepted in the wider regional and global community has also made a growing number of countries in the region to be more open to such concepts as “universal values” as well as to binding regional and international ties.

This process is still at a fairly early stage, but one can foresee interesting trends developing in which greater convergences at the regional and global levels will be matched by greater autonomy and plurality at the local level. In other words, as national identities become more well established in Asia, they can afford to become much more open and dynamics. Local identities, supra-regional identities and global citizenships will likely exist alongside established national identities, each having an influence in the evolution of the other. For Asian societies, with their rich cultural traditions, there lies a hope that in the future they can contribute to the enrichment of a more plural global culture, instead of being merely consumers of a monolithic global mass culture.***